WHY EDUCATE THE DEAF-BLIND?

By

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WHY EDUCATE THE DEAF-BLIND

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At a time when in various parts of the world, legislation exists which requires that all children be educated regardless of the severity of any handicap they may have, this question "Why Educate the Deaf-Blind?" might seem irrelevant. This, however, is far from being the case. It is a question which requires discussion whenever possible, and I welcome every opportunity to participate in such considerations.

Throughout the world there are undoubtedly many thousands of children still who are denied any share in available education. These include groups who are victims of discrimination for religious, racial, or social reasons. With them we are not concerned at the present. Also there are those who are discriminated against because they are slow of learning or emotionally disturbed, and finally those who have physical handicaps.

Even in regions where the blind and deaf are given a chance of an education the multihandicapped deaf or blind, and perhaps especially the deaf-blind, are still considered as uneducable. The reasons for this are not always entirely clear.

Now, a law which requires every child however retarded or however handicapped physically to be "educated" is using the word education in the widest imaginable way. For the purposes of this paper I would like to follow this admirable precedent. Also if I may for this paper, I will consider the deaf-blind to be those who fall into the definition in use in the United States of America and in several other countries.

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That is, a child who is too seriously handicapped visually to be educated satisfactorily as a deaf child and who has too serious an auditory defect to be included in regular programs for the blind should be considered as deaf-blind and provided with special educational programs. This definition obviously covers a very wide range of people and for the purposes of this discussion I am arbitrarily going to consider the deaf-blind under five general headings.

A. The Highly Educable - These are college material though not necessarily college-bound.

B. The Superior Deaf-Blind who are capable of becoming financially independent at least at a modest level.

C. The Average who make up the majority. Most are capable of training in a saleable skill but probably need the security of some kind of home life environment which they cannot create entirely for themselves. These are on the borderline of financial independence. Most will need aid of some kind, either public or family.

D. The Unemployable - Most of them are capable of a considerable measure of self-care and also are capable of enjoying social experiences and recreation. Nevertheless, most of them are too immature to submit to the rigors of regular or even part-time employment.

E. Finally, we must accept the fact that regardless of what legislation may exist in some places there are some who are untrainable, including at the lowest level the permanent bedridden.

Let us now consider these groups in greater detail.

A. The Highly Educable - College Material - This is the group which meets with the least opposition as regards to education. It is, of course, an extremely small group and perhaps throughout the world and throughout all history has numbered less than twenty. For the most part it consists of people who enjoyed the use of hearing until

language and speech were well established. A notable exception to this is, of course, Helen Keller, who knew only a few words when meningitis struck and apparently she soon forgot them.

These few deaf-blind are among the great inspirations of the human race. They provide encouragement not only to their handicapped fellows but to millions of us who are generally considered normal. No price would have been too high to give the world the educated Helen Keller. Personally I find it difficult to think of my own life if Helen Keller had never lived. Thanks to Anne Sullivan and a few others, the financial cost of educating Helen was, in fact, negligible.

This group can usually become financially self-supporting and can render services to society that are valuable in themselves. Although they are still part of the deaf-blind community whom Helen Keller described as "the loneliest people on earth" they are usually capable of establishing themselves as part of a social unit.

B. The Superior Group - The borderlines between the groups I have so arbitrarily described are tenuous. There are deaf-blind men and women whom I would include in this group who perhaps belong in Group A. There are a number of deaf-blind men and women now living inconspicuous lives in various parts of the world. They are usually members of a family unit, planning their own livings. Most of them have good speech, usually but not always acquired before they lost their hearing. There should be no question about the right of this group to an education. They can become a part of normal society and as such, are entitled to all of the privileges society can offer.

C. The Average who perhaps make up as many as 80% of the whole. This large group is so varied that it is difficult to consider it as a unit. In this year 1974, the majority of the deaf-blind in this group are victims of maternal rubella which means, of course, the acquisition of language is a serious problem. The rubella children have varied greatly in the degree of their handicaps which are frequently not limited to blindness and deafness and all of these handicaps have been with them since birth and even earlier.

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In this average group, whether rubella or not, I would include all who are capable of acquiring saleable skills even though their social level may make open employment improbable. For all of these some means of communication with their fellows can be taught. I am not going to engage in a dispute as to whether this should include speech, but it is our experience that a large number of this group, as well as all in the two higher groups A and B, can be taught to understand speech and to speak so that they can in turn be understood.

I consider for this average group an education is particularly important. It can and usually does make all of the difference between rewarding and productive lives and the intolerable burden of isolation in institutions where there is almost invariably a minimum of communication skills among the other clients and the staff. Education alone does not eliminate the loneliness of deaf-blindness but an ability to communicate with others can reduce it significantly.

D. The Unemployable - There are still lower levels whom we have considered who cannot engage in any form of useful employment. Perhaps an ability to care for their own personal needs and some capacity for social recreation is as much as most of them will acquire. This group also includes a number who become senior citizens long before their time.

There is much that can be done for these people though many might not call it education. Much of it can be done by untrained personnel and even by volunteers. It is important that somebody make themselves responsible for establishing a relationship which is consistent and has a large measure of continuity. Regular visits by volunteers can accomplish a great deal in giving self-respect and a feeling of belonging to these "loneliest people on earth." Perhaps the greatest need is for professionals who have become acquainted with the problems of the deaf-blind helping those who will have the responsibility for caring for these unfortunate people to keep open channels of communication and keep alive a feeling of concern.

Whether this be "education" or not, it is a service which these people most certainly require.

E. Finally, even the bedridden, imbecile or idiot should not be neglected until it is clearly established that meaningful communication cannot be established. The more that we learn about non-verbal communication, the more we realize the potentiality of communication through contact.

From top to bottom of the list then, the deaf-blind can profit greatly from educational services. Why then should there be any question about providing these services.

I think there are three chief reasons why educational services are denied. These are the high cost, the feeling that there are no trained personnel available, and finally, a doubt as to whether any of it is worthwhile.

First of all, let us think about cost. This certainly is formidable. Costs indeed can be very high and it should be noted that the greater the ability of the student to learn the longer will be his educational program, and in all probability the greater will be the cost.

I would like to consider several examples of deaf-blind people in which these different obstacles have had to be considered. First of all, I would like to discuss Chan Poh Lin. Many of you may have heard or met this Chinese girl from Singapore who lost her sight and then her hearing in her early teens. The Perkins Trustees accepted her initially on a two-year scholarship, paying for a Chinese teacher to accompany her from Singapore with the expectation that at the end of the two years her education would continue in her native city. However, after returning home when the two-year period was up, in spite of a determined effort by herself and her teacher and good cooperation from the staff of the Singapore School for the Blind, she began to slip back in the vital area of communication. Since she had shown in Watertown that she could go a lot farther both in academic studies and social competence, the Trustees invited her back for an indefinite period. She seized the opportunity offered her, learning many things both academic and others. She became very competent in sewing, making her own dresses.

She learned to enjoy dancing and to become very skilled at it. She became a good cook.

This was a girl who knew not a word of English before losing her hearing. Before finally returning to Singapore to earn a living, she had a sufficient command of written and spoken English to establish herself as a valuable member of the school faculty. She has unique qualities. They have become apparent. She has a great gift for helping slow learners whom other teachers have failed to reach. She teaches dancing, gymnastics and sewing. She has tremendous energy and enthusiasm. She also has great confidence in herself and seeks out, and even demands a chance to tackle difficult tasks. She has, in short, found herself through education. She not only knows what she can do, she knows what she cannot do also. Although she declined the chance to proceed to college when she realized it would require at least six years before she could obtain a degree, she has demonstrated a capability usually associated with the college graduate. The cost? Perkins has never totalled it up, but it must have run into six figures in United States dollars. That sum invested in a permanent fund would have provided her with a handsome pension for life. Was it worthwhile financially? I like to think of it this way. If the Perkins Trustees had not invested in her education, she would for all of her days had to face the frustration of not knowing what she could accomplish if given a chance to prove herself. Whatever her frustrations may be, and she has many, she at least knows she has been given that chance. I think this is really what education of the handicapped is all about. It is giving each girl and boy the chance to find out for themselves how far they can go. Then, whether they go far or hardly anywhere, they are spared the saddest regret of all. They cannot say, " If only I had been given a chance." They can face the difficult lack of adjusting to circumstances without feeling that society, as well as their handicap, held them back.

To return to the cost. Costs are relative to the means. With Poh Lin, Perkins could absorb the cost. Having the means, they would, I think, have been remiss had they declined to use them in her behalf.

But let us also consider the question of trained personnel. Perkins, of course, had this but Poh Lin had already demonstrated that it was worthwhile providing her with these services. Before she ever came to America she had worked in the School in Singapore with a very remarkable man, Rueben Jacobs, a blind Indian who had learned braille while a prisoner in a Japanese prison camp. None of us really know how he reached Poh Lin, but somehow or other he conveyed to her the story of Helen Keller, who, both deaf and blind, accomplished much. Poh Lin, who had spent several years of complete despair and neglect suddenly began to realize that life still had possibility. Without this initial contact with the unskilled and untrained Rueben Jacobs, Poh Lin's situation would never have been heard outside Singapore, and she would not have been offered an education.

Finally, the question arises as to whether anyone thought it worthwhile. Already at Perkins we have seen the results of education with many deaf-blind people and we know it is always worthwhile.

Now by way of contrast I would like to consider a child way down near the bottom of the scale. I am thinking of a little girl in the School for the Blind in Bangkok, Thailand. This little one was abandoned by her parents. She is blind and apparently deaf. She has never spoken. She is five or thereabouts now, I believe. She is sometimes destructive and could under no circumstances be considered a satisfactory student. However, she has learned something about life and has benefited from social experiences. She has been accepted by pupils and staff. She hears enough to enjoy the singing and is aware of friendly people about her. She is constantly exposed to affection and encouraged to feel people's lips as they speak. She seems to have grasped a few words and understands commands by touch. Sometimes she seems to be trying to speak, maybe - sometimes - some words - who can tell? Fortunately, the cost is small. The staff, although not trained in the highly technical problems of educating the deaf-blind, are doing a wonderful job of non-verbal communication and the little girl is considered worthy of all they have to give.

I would also like to tell the story of another deaf-blind person who has been responsible for raising more money for the deaf-blind than anyone else in history.

This boy is Leonard Dowdy. I first knew Leonard in 1933 when I joined the Perkins staff and he was six years old. He had already lost both sight and hearing. He immediately impressed me with his tremendous desire for learning. As he travelled around the campus in the care of an attendant, he would feel the surface of the ground with his feet, reach out with a spare hand to see if he could make any contact, and would sniff the air to see what smell could bring to him.

Leonard had his breakfast in the cottage where I was Housemaster and at breakfast he was expected to ask for his milk before given a chance to drink. He could not really say the word milk, but he made an effort to do so. His attendant would then place his hand on her lips and say "milk, Leonard, milk." This would go on several times and day after day. Six months later I calculated that I had heard Leonard say milk some ten thousand times. This in itself was not remarkable until I realized that in the spring as in the fall Leonard was just as eager to pronounce his words correctly and his teacher was just as enthusiastic about it. Leonard had not been allowed to learn that repetition can be boring. The teacher of the deaf-blind needs to learn this lesson. It is something more than patience. It is an adjustment to a situation. I knew at that moment that I never could teach the deaf-blind, but thank heaven there are many who have this ability.

When Leonard grew up, he became self-supporting. He has a job in a factory, owns his own house, is married, and travels to work daily unescorted. Many times he has expressed a wish to raise money for deaf-blind children so that they could benefit from the schooling that he did. Unbeknown to him, the opportunity came.

When Perkins and the Industrial Home for the Blind in Brooklyn celebrated the 100th birthday of Anne Sullivan, who was Helen Keller's teacher, a banquet was given in a New York hotel and Leonard's story was told. Leonard was also present. The story so impressed the late Miss Mary E. Switzer, who was President Johnson's representative, that

she obtained the President's permission to draw up legislation to provide federal support for the deaf-blind. The resulting legislation now feeds millions of dollars annually into this cause. I have not totalled this up lately, but I think that at least 50 million dollars has been expended because of Leonard. Had he not been what he was, this story would never have been told and this legislation would never have been passed.

Of course Leonard was fortunate for his teacher was one of the most successful teachers in the history of the education of the deaf-blind, Miss Inis B. Hall, and there was never any question in anyone's mind either in his native state of Missouri or on the Perkins faculty that this was a boy who should have been given every possible opportunity.

The examples I have given come from the extremes on the scale. The real problem facing society, of course, is the group in the middle. It has been shown that men and women who have learned the techniques of teaching the deaf and have had some experience in working with the blind can indeed prepare themselves without too much difficulty to teach the deaf-blind. There are, of course, training programs available both in the United States and in Europe, as well as in your own North Rocks School in Sydney. From these centers teachers have gone out in recent years to many parts of the world and programs of varying size and sophistication have resulted.

The great tragedy is that deaf-blind children are not reached at an early enough age. This is terribly important and it may well be that failure to reach these infants in many of the developing countries results in the tragic situation where they do not survive the first year of infancy. A great deal is being learned nowadays about the importance of non-verbal communication between parent and child and with a non-responsive child, the communication from the parent is likely to become stunted. The feeding processes can become ineffective, malnutrition, disease and death could easily follow. This seems to be the only explanation for the fact that in so many countries it is reported that "we have no deaf-blind children." However, even in some of the least developed countries, a few deaf-blind children are beginning to be reported but invariably in the

cities centers. It no doubt will be a long time before the necessary understanding of the problem will be spread to the remote villages of the world and give every deaf-blind child an opportunity from birth of some kind of education.

In the final analysis the answer to the question "Why Educate the Deaf-Blind" is because we must, not because legislation tells us to but because none of us can remain comfortable while anyone who can profit from an education is denied it anywhere at any time.

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